

THE ART OF CRAFT

Britain's leading ceramic artist *Edmund de Waal* talks craft and connoisseurship with philanthropist Nicholas Goodison, to celebrate the Nicholas and Judith Goodison collection at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, and to mark this year's Collect fair. Portrait by Phil Sayer

Sitting with Sir Nicholas Goodison in the pale winter light of a December afternoon I keep being distracted by the arms of my chair. We are in his drawing-room, either side of a handsome desk on which three sculptures in glass are placed in conversation, and he is telling me how these chairs were made and why they were made. And he is fired up. I must look at the proportions of the chair, the way in which the joints work, the choice of wood, the quality of the grain. And then look at the influence of Chinese and Korean furniture on these English chairs, their unusual balance. I must get up and sit down again to realise just how remarkable they are. They are the work of Alan Peters, a cabinet-maker whose career spanned the post-war period, and I am in the company of an evangelical collector, patron and public supporter of the arts. I do as I am told.

This is the essential Nicholas. He may have been involved with almost every cultural body of any consequence – inter alia the Courtauld, *The Burlington Magazine*, the Fitzwilliam, ENO, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and, of course, the Art Fund – written reports for government on the funding of museums, on archives, on heritage; but he is a straightforward and down-to-earth believer in contact with the arts he loves. Institutions matter because they safeguard values, but they are only the vehicle: he wants you to see, to hear or to pick up and handle the things that he cares about.

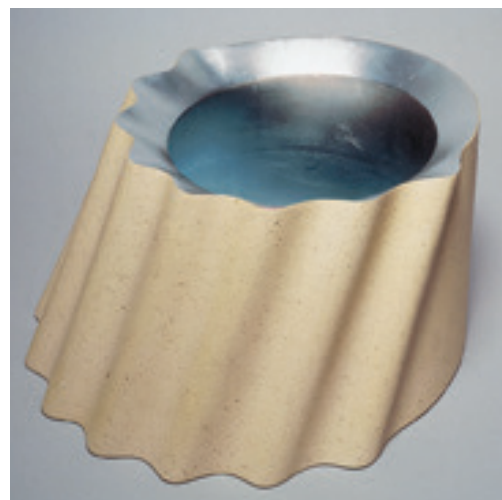
A tremendous example of this is his advocacy for the crafts. Nicholas is a familiar figure in studios and at exhibitions, a tall form stooping



Above: Nicholas Goodison (left) and Edmund de Waal in conversation. The chairs are designed by Alan Peters, and the glass work on the table by Colin Reid

Nicholas Arroyave-Portela
Crumpled Vase, 2000 (right)
 'Arroyave-Portela is a young maker whose innovative work suggests interesting future developments'
 Nicholas Goodison

Martin Smith
White Noise III, 2001 (below)
 'Smith is an established maker, with a keen interest in the theory of perspective, whose use of colour and reflective surfaces on his non-functional vessels is fascinating' NG



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down over a pot, quizzical and intrigued in equal measure. I have been on the receiving end of his scrutiny: my early porcelain was interrogated at the Chelsea Crafts Fair 20 years ago and I remember the seriousness of his questions as he picked over my stand. He ran big companies I was told sympathetically by a bohemian maker of scarves, as he moved off into the crowds. And then he came back and bought something and I felt I had arrived, because it was not a whimsical purchase but a real decision. For his interest in the crafts is unstinting, but it is not wide-eyed. He has no romanticism about the place that the crafts hold in relation to the other arts – no chair of the Crafts Council faced with the internecine arguments for funding could have been – but neither does he adhere to the Embattled Camp of Craft which insists on hyperactive cheer-leading. The case for craft is made, he says, through the excellence of the object and the clarity of its presentation to the world. This is why he relishes the relationship that the Art Fund has established with regional museums at Collect, the annual art fair for objects, organised by the Crafts Council. Curators must choose the object which they would love to have for their collection and then make their case, passionately and cogently, in front of the object itself to a committee who must decide if X gallery needs a piece of Japanese jewellery, or Y museum should add to their glass collections. This is a kind of living art history of course, a testing of knowledge and eye in public.

Nicholas is good on what connoisseurship means too, a term that has seemed in terminal decline since Horace Walpole. Beset by the radical resetting of the agendas of art history, the idea suggests a rarefied and patrician disinterest in why the arts happen. But he makes the point that at the heart of connoisseurship is a simple concept of sustained study, a fierce focus on the particularity of this cabinet, this gouache, this piece of maiolica. Each object is *sui generis*, he argues with heat, and needs to be treated with attention, examined with affection. Then – and only then – can its context be illuminated. This is true of any of the arts, but Nicholas has made this his own in the decorative arts, whether historic barometers (the subject of his first book in 1968), or the ormolu of Matthew Boulton, on which he wrote a scholarly monograph. These objects could be impossibly arcane, but they are not, says Nicholas, they are engaging because they reveal the person who created them.

This is abundantly clear in the collection of contemporary ceramics, glass, furniture and jewellery that he and his wife, Judith, have spent 15 years putting together for the Fitzwilliam Museum. Nicholas's love for the Fitzwilliam shines out. He read classics at King's College, Cambridge and spent hours as an undergraduate discovering the collections of the museum, loving, he says, the ambience of the mixture of the different arts – the way in which a Renaissance cabinet held a resonance with a picture, the placing of paintings near to a long-case clock. He recounts a conversation held in

the stores of the museum with Duncan Robinson, then the director, in which they bemoaned the beige and brown tenor of the ceramics collections, stalled in a Bernard Leach morass, and the lack of a proper acquisitions budget to remedy this. So Nicholas and Judith decided to do something about it. They decided that they would create a collection for the Fitzwilliam, given through the Art Fund, and add to it incrementally, so that it reflected their changing

Adi Toch
Large Reflection Bowl, 2012 (above)
 'This is by a young maker with enormous promise, not yet well represented in public collections' NG

Richard Slee
Short Measure, 1988 (below)
 'Slee's work, often witty and sometimes surreal, amuses and surprises like a lot of Pop Art' NG



tastes and the ways in which their ideas and styles evolved. In doing so it also avoided the homogenised 'ready-made' quality that is discernible in some American museum craft collections, a shopping list of star names. Their gift is a superb legacy. A hundred pieces. No, a hundred *serious* pieces.

Going through the lists of objects that the Goodisons have donated is instructive. There are the big-hitters who any museum would be thrilled to have: ceramics by Jennifer Lee, Julian Stair, Sutton Taylor; glass by Colin Reid, David Reekie, Keiko Mukaide; furniture by Alan Peters and Jim Partridge; a bracelet by David Poston. For many, this is the first time they have become part of a museum collection. It is a critical transition. Not just a validation, but a liminal moment of passing over into the public realm, of having your work placed in a continuum. Here are pieces by Adi Toch and Merete Rasmussen, all makers at the start of their careers. And they look convincing.

Nicholas has always had the belief that the work environment could also be a place of delight, hence commissioning Alan Peters to make a large suite of furniture for the Stock Exchange and his pioneering collection of art and craft for the TSB, both bodies that he chaired. The furniture from Peters came out of the conviction that not every boardroom in the country had to be stuffed with ersatz Georgian mahogany or contract furnishings. And for the Fitzwilliam he has continued, commissioning Rod and Alison Wales to make a superb marriage chest.

Merete Rasmussen
Blue Twisted Form, 2011 (right)
'This is a fluid and colourful form of considerable beauty, and another striking and technically difficult piece that draws the attention' NG

Adam Paxon
Brooch with Four Eyes II, 2010 (below)
'Paxon's acrylic jewellery is technically extraordinary and provocative - you cannot walk past this brooch, it catches your eye. His work is a must for any serious collection of modern craft' NG



This is a Constructivist reimagining of what a chest can be, a quietly spoken piece of furniture, beautifully constructed from fumed and limed oak, bog oak and stainless steel, that opens up in an azure blaze of glory. Ignoring the 'do not touch' signs, he has been known to demonstrate this to groups of visitors. This kind of collecting, the extended conversation with a maker about materials, scale and placement, is one that he relishes.

Museums have a role to be open about their mission and the imagination to know what this entails. But collectors have roles too. They can support collections and collecting through giving with intelligence and with passion. They can commission. They can encourage scholarship, curatorship and, yes, connoisseurship. They can give in public so that others learn how to give. Why, I ask Nicholas, does it matter? He replies that there is joy in the perpetual education of looking. It is such a good line, that I write it in my notebook and feel jealous. And it stays with me because it is true.

● For further information regarding the Nicholas and Judith Goodison collection at the Fitzwilliam, see www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/explorer. Collect 2013, Saatchi Gallery, London, 10-13 April. www.collect2013.org.uk. £8.50 National Art Pass (£17 standard)

Edmund de Waal is a potter and writer. Future projects include a collaboration with the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and his first solo show in New York, at Gagosian Gallery in autumn 2013

